

## Gingerbread

Noelle recognized the importance of sleep, but she had never cared for it. The issue, of course, was not sleep itself, but the byproduct of sleep: dreams, specifically nightmares. Noelle had had nightmares nearly every night of her life.

Her father also suffered from nightmares. He joked grimly with her that nightmares were hereditary. In truth, what she had inherited from him was a sliver of his mental illness. He was a paranoid schizophrenic. He was convinced there was a conspiracy against him, he heard voices, and he often complained about an old man sitting in the corner. He never described the old man, but he knew that one day the man would kill him.

The first time Noelle realized something was wrong with her father was when she was four years old. He was dragging her through the streets, telling her not to look behind them. They were being followed by a crazy woman in a bloody smock, if she caught up with them, she would drag Noelle away, and he would never get her back. Noelle was terrified. Nonetheless, she did look back, and there was of course no woman; there was barely anybody on the streets at all. Her father dragged her through a crosswalk against a red light. Her father took the brunt of the force from the car, but she was still thrown to the ground, breaking her arm. After that incident, she still had frequent visits with her father, but she lived with her aunt.

The dreams started a week or so after she moved in with her aunt. Her aunt kept talking about her birthday, asking her what kind of cake she wanted, what she wanted to eat, who she wanted to invite. Noelle just wanted to see her father. Absent-mindedly she asked for cookies instead of a cake.

The morning of her birthday, after roughly a month living with her aunt, she was fed a decadent breakfast of waffles with every kind of sugary topping she could imagine. Around 11:00 a host of strange children she barely knew arrived to celebrate with her, they were all as confused as she was, none of them really knew each other. Adults like to throw children together, less because they want them to get along and more because it's an interesting social experiment. The children entertained themselves, not knowing what else to do. They gathered in packs, fixating on certain toys, establishing a hierarchy, establishing a rotation of "turns." Noelle found the quietest child she could find, a strawberry-blonde girl, and played with her the rest of the morning. Around noon they were given lunch, and then fed another egregious helping of sugar in the form of every kind of cookie imaginable, with ice cream of course. The children descended on the cookies like tiny barbarians, seizing the very best before Noelle, the birthday girl, had even had a chance to choose. All that remained were a couple Gingerbread Men. She skipped the cookies and ate ice cream instead. After the ice cream, Noelle searched for her strawberry-blonde friend, but apparently, she had gone home, and Noelle never saw her again. She spent the rest of the day, isolated from her own party. She couldn't really understand. It was all for her, and yet, none of the other children included her. Everyone left and she finally had a chance to play with her gifts. That night she had her first real nightmare.

She dreamed it was her birthday all over again. Children were packed into the kitchen so tight they couldn't even move. Noelle sat at the table, surrounded by obese little children, stuffing their faces with cookies that somehow never ran out. Directly across from her sat what looked like an old man. Its face was wrinkled like an old man's, its head was bald and gray like an old man's, but it had no features except one. There were no eyes, there was no nose, there

were no ears: only a wicked little smile of rotten teeth. It reached out its hand, picked up a Gingerbread Man, and broke off one of its legs. She awoke with a start. All the next day her leg hurt, but she knew it was just psychosomatic, long before she learned that word.

A few years after moving in with her aunt her father's condition worsened to the point where it was deemed she would no longer be safe with him. A few months after this decision was made he somehow managed to kill himself, despite constant observation and usually being physically restrained. Noelle, being a child was not told how he had done it, and when she grew older she chose not to ask.

Noelle's dreams were always worse around her birthday. The week before, the shape of the old man would appear in various places in her dreams getting closer and closer until on her birthday she dreamed the same dream as the first one in which he had appeared. The only difference was she and the other children were older. It was for this reason that Noelle asked her aunt to stop celebrating her birthday. Her aunt was a little upset by this, but she complied. The following year there was no birthday party. When she went to sleep that night, the dream was different. There were no children, there was only the old man. But now he had a face, a face she would grow to hate and fear. Later, she came to know him as the Baker.

When Noelle was nine she began to show signs of clinical depression. Her aunt scoffed at the idea that a child so young could suffer from depression, but to her credit she found Noelle a counselor. During the course of her counseling sessions Noelle brought up her nightmares. Her counselor was very interested in the old man, knowing that Noelle's father had often complained about an old man himself. The good doctor assumed that the references to a mysterious old man had made an impression on Noelle, and thus she had created a frightening old man of her own. Furthermore, the old man was a representation of unresolved trauma. Eventually Noelle got so tired of talking about him that she pretended she had stopped dreaming about him. Her therapist knew this was a lie, but thought it better not to confront Noelle, but rather to try to coax it back out of her. A year into their sessions Noelle's doctor moved, recommending another Counselor for her to see. Noelle kept the card but told her Aunt she didn't want to go to counseling anymore. She was better, she claimed. Noelle didn't speak to another therapist until she was a Freshman in High School, right after her first suicide attempt.

The nightmares continued through college. Always worse around her birthday, or during a depressive episode. She was glad that her birthday was in the summer so that the worst of the nightmares didn't happen at school.

Her third week at college she met Frank, though they didn't start dating until the following semester. He was in her Intro to Psychology class. Noelle had been considering being a Psychology major. She and Frank had been paired together for a class assignment. They were to ask each other five stock questions and come up with an additional five to ask, they were allowed one follow up question for each one. Frank was attentive, kind, and empathetic, which in some ways made her more nervous than if he had been inattentive, aloof, and cold. Attention, even when desired, can serve as a spotlight to every aspect of our character that makes us feel self-conscious. Attention can be dangerous. Conversely, being ignored, can be safe. Nonetheless, when she saw him in the cafeteria the next day she asked if she could sit with him. When he said yes, she was surprised by how happy it made her.

Her nightmares changed when she returned home for her first Christmas break. It is not uncommon to have reoccurring dreams or to revisit specific places. Her first night home, and every night after, she dreamed she was in a small village.

It had a strangely German feel, though she couldn't necessarily place why she thought that, it just felt as though it was. The village was one single cobblestone street, with seven small buildings on either side. It rested on a grassy hillside meadow, overlooking a wooded valley, and overlooked by a formidable rock face dotted with mountain goats.

The village was populated entirely by old people, seven in all. There was a tailor, cobbler, butcher, grocer, mortician, candlestick maker, and the Baker. She feared the Baker the most. Each person was only found in their place of business, she had never seen a home in the village in all the years she had dreamed of it. No one seemed to frequent the others establishment, so she didn't understand how they stayed in business. Of course, it was only a dream village, so they didn't need consistent trade to stay solvent. Nonetheless, it was difficult for her not to think of the village as a real place. Oftentimes it seemed more real than her waking life, which frightened her almost as much as the village itself.

In her dreams, she would find herself floating from business to business, with a vague sense that she was traveling a predetermined path; one she could not stray from, that she could never escape. A path without a happy ending. Nothing good could ever happen in that place. She never opened any doors, she would drift towards a place, and then suddenly find herself inside. Only a few of the proprietors ever interacted with her. The majority of them stood behind their counters, or by their tools of trade, staring into space. An air of doom hung over the entire village.

The tailor was a tall man, with a full head of silver hair. He wore brown pants, a white shirt, suspenders, and always had a measuring tape hanging over his shoulders, as is the common image of a tailor. He had an enormous hairy mole on his chin. He was found in different places in his shop, but for any dream within which she visited him, he would never move from that one spot. One night she might visit him and find him in front of an open, free-standing wardrobe, searching through the hanging clothes, as though trying to find a specific item of clothing, but never able to. Other nights she would find him repeatedly measuring a well-dressed mannequin, or standing at his work-desk trying to cut a piece of cloth with scissors too dull to cut anything; he was never frustrated by the futility of trying to cut the cloth, but he never stopped trying.

The cobbler was a short, round, bald man, with wiry tufts of ear hair. He was one of the few who interacted with her. Every time she found herself in his shop he would say the same thing: "Oh! You have red hair, I adore redheads, I was married to one you know. Please sit, I have just the pair of shoes for you." Reluctantly, she would sit on a stool while he forced myriad shoes on to her feet and lecherously pawed at her toes, ankles, and calves. He breathed heavily, and very nearly drooled, making no attempts to conceal his state of arousal. There was something else he always said a few shoes into the ritual: "You remind me so much of my daughter."

The butcher's shop was one of the places she hated most, not *the* most, but it was close to the top. Rancid meat was laid out in no discernible order in unrefrigerated display cases. Flies buzzed everywhere, and several pieces of meat were crawling with maggots. A large pig turned perpetually on a spit in an open fireplace. The butcher herself, stood behind a red-stained counter, staring with black eyes at the door, as though expecting someone to enter. She had long black and grey hair that was pulled into a loose bun. Her arms were always rigidly held straight-

down at her sides. Her apron was stained with the blood of whatever she had butchered last. In her hand, she tightly gripped a meat-hook. Noelle would stand in the shop, flies lighting on her face, crawling into her ears, and stare at the woman who in turn stared blankly forward. Before Noelle would leave the shop, the butcher would always turn to a covered silver platter and slowly, mechanically, remove the lid, underneath which was the severed head of a black wolf. The wolf would scream in a human voice, and its eyes would dart from side to side, searching for an escape.

The walls of the grocer's shop were lined with glass cases filled with canned goods of various kinds. Behind the counter there was a wall of wooden shelves filled with flour, sugar, spices, and various other household staples. The wall of shelves extended up towards the ceiling which was hidden by darkness and distance. Outside the building looked normal; inside there was no vertical end to it.

The grocer was a friendly looking woman with tight curly hair. She would stand frozen, smiling kindly into space; every time Noelle turned away she could see the grocer in the reflection of the glass cases. The grocer bustled about with inhuman speed, yet she would always take the time to pause and glare at the back of Noelle's head.

The morgue, ironically perhaps, was the most peaceful place in the village. When she stepped through the door she found herself in an open white room with a black couch in the center of the room and an old-time elevator across from the door. Gentle music played in the lobby. Flowers of every genus and phylum were placed on the floor in every corner of the room surrounding a large standing vase filled with large purple flowers. There was green ivy growing from an unknown source behind each vase, forming a butterfly shape with the wings extending from the center of the corner onto the adjacent walls. Blue flowers grew from the floor in front of the vases, and a single red flower grew from their center.

The mortician was a tall black-haired transsexual with a jagged as a rock Adams apple, wearing a long black-haired wig. She wore a black pant suit that fitted poorly. Her face was powdered white but her saggy turkey neck had a peach-pink undertone. Her eyes were done up in a bad cat-eye. Everything about her makeup was clumsy, like she had not made a genuine effort, like she was only pretending to be trans. Anytime Noelle approached the elevator she would raise one pale hand and wag one finger as if to say naughty-naughty. Noelle never dared to go any further, she would just linger in the room and look at the flowers.

The Chandler's shop was mostly empty. There was a counter against the wall with an overturned and empty till. Candles were strewn randomly across the floor. The candlestick maker himself lay on his bed in the middle of the shop; a morbidly obese corpulescence, entirely immobile, wheezing, his sickly green eyes following her every movement, one hand gently tugging underneath the covers, snickering all the while. Any time she turned to him he would freeze, his pervert's smile frozen on his face. A sickly-sweet smell like that of vomit emanated from his bed. His white sheets and comforter were discolored by sweat stains, and she could see mold on the corner of the mattress. There was a chamber-pot next to the bed with flies buzzing around it. She never lingered for very long in his shop.

At the end of the street stood the bakery, a small red brick building. A sign with a loaf of bread hung from the door frame. There was a small porch out front with two rocking chairs, between which was a small round wooden table. A wandering Jew plant flourished from a hanging basket on one side of the porch. The yard was a lush green, split by the stone walkway

leading from the road to the front door. The door itself was light blue with a gold knocker and a welcome sign hanging from a small hook.

When she stepped inside she found herself in a large, long room too big for the size of the building. The room was lit only by a large brick oven at the far end, facing the door. Every time she stepped inside she felt compelled to walk towards the oven. Each step she took compounded her dread. The room always grew longer as she walked until all at once it would snap back to normal size and she would find herself standing so close to the oven that the heat of it made her sweat. Something was burning inside, she could never tell what it was, but she could see it had once been alive. As she gazed into the oven a gingerbread woman would form out of nothing. It's small cookie eyes were far too life-like, and they would gaze up at her in horror, as though a human consciousness was trapped inside.

Unnerved, she would turn away from the gingerbread back towards the door, to find the old man who had plagued her dreams since childhood, now in his new role as the Baker, blocking the exit. Just a shadow, he would walk slowly towards her, hands clasped behind his back. The light revealed him in stages. First, she could see his glasses, two shiny round surfaces in the dark moving towards her, reflecting fire. Then his worn-out shoes and pin-stripe pants, then his belt with a buckle shaped like a loaf of bread, which would have been cute if anyone else were wearing it. Then his burgundy shirt. He didn't dress like what she imagined a baker would. Finally, his face, lined and cracked with age would emerge from the shadow. He would tilt his head so that the glare vanished and she could see his eyes. One eye was turned eternally upward, half hidden by his eye lid. The other eye, a strange shade of orange, looked on her with a craven hunger. Red blood vessels formed webs in his sclera. Slowly he would unfold his hands from behind his back and reach out towards her. His hands were bloody. Most of his fingers had been gnawed off by dull teeth. She always woke before he touched her, for which she was grateful.

Every nightmare after her first Christmas break was some variation of visits to that same village. Sometimes she would spend the whole night in one shop, sometimes she would fade in and out of the different locations and sometimes she would find herself trapped inside the Gingerbread Man in the baker's shop, looking up in horror at the Baker.

When Noelle returned to school she found a counselor close by and scheduled regular visits. Ultimately, she didn't care for this new counselor, but she thought it unwise to stop seeing him. His focus was on pinpointing what childhood trauma was causing the dreams. The assumption seemed to be that she had been molested by an old man, which was why so many of the figures in her dream were senior males. For whatever reason, he didn't seem to think that her father's cryptic references to an old man had much of anything to do with the dreams. He could never suss out the memory though. As such, they could never work through the trauma.

Eventually she went to a psychiatrist who prescribed drugs to help her sleep, and while they worked, that only meant she was stuck in the dreams for longer. It was harder to wake up when drugged.

She had several sleep studies done as well. However, these didn't really tell her anything new. All they amounted to was a group of scientists watching her sleep; logging her vitals while she had nightmares.

After her twenty-first birthday she turned to drinking alcohol in order to help suppress dream sleep, as she had heard that alcohol inhibits that particular sleep state. It didn't help, and

as she didn't particularly like the feeling of being buzzed or drunk in any degree, she quickly gave it up.

When science failed her she turned to crystals and superstitions. She found charms, warding spells, burned sage and incense. She spoke to a Catholic priest in case there was demonic activity. The Priest listened sympathetically, invited her to come to Mass, and advised her to continue with her counseling. He encouraged her to come again. She told him she would, and immediately felt bad about lying to a Priest.

She found an old Westphalian prayer for warding off Nightmares, which she took to repeating every night as she lay in bed:

Here I am lying down to sleep;  
No nightmare shall plague me  
until they have swum through all waters  
that flow upon the earth,  
and counted all stars  
that appear in the skies.

Thus, help me God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

It comforted her while awake, but regrettably did nothing to prevent the dreams. No sooner had she fallen asleep then she found herself back in the village. Sometimes she could hear her own voice, coming down from the heavens repeating the prayer back to her, her own consciousness taunting her.

Two weeks into the Spring semester Frank asked her out. She hesitated to say yes because of her dreams, because of her family history, because as a friend he could be understanding and helpful, but as a boyfriend he wouldn't just be supportive, he would be taking on her madness, helping to shoulder the burden. She wanted to share it with him, but she knew she would feel guilty about it; she felt guilty for even wanting it.

Frank saw that she hesitated, and asked her why, thinking it was something about him. She replied honestly. Frank knew she had difficulty sleeping, that she had nightmares, that her father had mental health issues, but he didn't know to what degree. He quietly listened, and when she was finished he asked her to take a chance, and she did.

Noelle's waking life was dramatically better with Frank. Somewhere in the back of her mind there was a faint prick of wounded pride, knowing how much she needed him, and how much he helped her. She had always wanted to be self-sufficient, even though she knew that in the end, no one is. It wasn't long before she ignored the sting of pride altogether, allowing herself to accept her need.

A week or so before the semester ended the nightmares got worse. She assumed it was because she and Frank would soon be separated for the summer. She was embarrassed knowing how much she dreaded that. It wasn't only that she was going to miss him, but she had come to rely on him so much she was afraid that she would not be able to cope apart from him, that her nightmares would finally get the better of her, as they had been trying to do for so long.

Two days before she had to vacate her dorm room she had a dream she was in the Baker's shop. There was something different about it. The room was not as long as it had been, and there

was a door she had never seen before, just past the furnace. The Baker sat at a square wooden table, stroking a small Gingerbread Woman. Noelle stood on the opposite side of the table, his unwilling audience. He smiled down at the cookie with the life-like eyes, and then snapped off its leg. Noelle winced. She could've sworn she heard a whimper from the room. The Baker chewed the leg slowly. There was the sound of painful gasping. He bit off the other leg and Noelle heard a scream. The Baker looked up at her. His eyes were taunting as he bit off half of one arm and then half of the other. More screams emitted from the room. The Baker turned to the source of the noise, and then back to Noelle, as if inviting her to have a look. Reluctantly, she walked to the door and took hold of the doorknob, which was hot due to its proximity to the furnace. She pushed the door open. Inside she found a young woman lying on the floor, screaming in pain. She had no legs and her arms were cut off at the elbow. Noelle turned from the woman to the Baker. Leering, he raised the Gingerbread Woman and snapped it in half. Noelle heard a cracking sound behind her and woke up.

She walked a half-mile to Frank's house that night. To date they hadn't spent the night together. She hated the fact that a nightmare could push their relationship into a realm that she hoped would be precipitated by something much more romantic. Frank was a perfect gentleman; in truth, sometimes she wished he was less of one. She had been ready for a while, but she didn't want to make the first move. She was glad that she was thinking about these things on the walk over. Thinking about love and sex was much healthier than obsessing over a bad dream. Regardless, she knew she couldn't be alone that night.

Frank was understanding as always. He offered to take the couch but Noelle insisted that they share the bed, it would make her feel safer. Frank in the next room wouldn't be nearly as helpful as Frank lying next to her. She stayed the remaining two days at Frank's, and then headed home for the summer.

Frank and Noelle visited each other often over the Summer. They spoke on the phone every night. When they returned to school Noelle stayed more nights at Frank's house than she did in her dorm room. For their remaining time, together they were inseparable, and very happy. They had issues like every couple, but the benefits of being together far outweighed any of the negatives.

Frank helped her with her depression and with her nightmares. When that support system was gone, everything took a dramatic turn for the worse. It didn't help that the accident happened the day before her birthday, when she needed him the most.

Over the course of the next year, the dreams became exponentially worse. They began to bleed into real life. She began to suffer from daytime hallucinations akin to delirium tremens. She would see the tailor standing on a street corner, watching her. She would find herself being waited on by the grocer. To her everlasting horror, she would find herself entering the baker's shop in broad daylight. He would approach her, ravening eye and bloody stumps outstretched. A shake of the head typically swept the vision away, like her brain was an Etch A Sketch. It wasn't the baker's shop, it was just the grocery store, but the feeling of horror followed her up and down every aisle; every person she encountered, every PA announcement, startled her. The baker lurked in every corner and his hazy reflection was found in every ceiling mirror.

One day, amidst one of her more serious struggles with depression, she saw the Candle-Stick Maker sitting in the corner of a coffee shop. No amount of blinking, shaking her head, or turning from side to side would make him vanish. He was sitting there in the real world. When

she turned her head away, she could see him staring at her, smiling and licking his lips. When she turned back to him, he was staring blankly into his cup of coffee. It was months before she could go back to that coffee shop.

The denizens of the dream village didn't stop with waking life, they made their way into her memories as well. She assumed her fear was inserting them into significant moments of her life, but as time went on and they became more and more integral to the memory, she began to believe they had always been there, though she tried to tell herself that was not possible. She remembered recalling these memories in the past, and she remembered that at those times, the villagers were nowhere to be seen, but in the present, she could not extricate them, they had become embedded in so many of her recollections that she tried not to remember anything at all.

When she remembered sleeping under the Christmas Tree, she saw the Mortician staring through the branches at her. The Cobbler was crawling up the enclosed water slide as she barreled down the tube, unable to stop herself from running into his groping arms. The Butcher, and the severed wolf's head, were at every holiday dinner. The only memories that remained untouched were memories of Frank, somehow his presence warded them off. Memories of Frank were painful, so she couldn't bear to linger on him forever.

Over time she found it more and more difficult to go to class, to go anywhere where she would be sitting in one place for too long. If she stopped and sat still, they would inevitably materialize all around her. Walking, running, these were the only things that kept them behind her. Driving, she would see them sitting in her back seat, so she bought a bike.

In the back of her mind she knew that she probably needed anti-psychotics. But she was afraid to tell her Psychiatrist just how bad it had gotten. She was afraid she would be committed. Afraid she would be trapped in a cell with all of them, without any means of escape.

The nightmares and the depression were beating her down. It wasn't what she wanted, but she knew that she was giving up. She was giving in. Fighting is an exhausting endeavor, and she had been doing it for so long.

A week before her birthday, the nature of the nightmares changed. She no longer roamed the village. Every night she sat in the corner of the Baker's shop, watching him prepare something. He had begun to look like a baker, wearing a white chef's suit and an apron. He paid her no attention; he was completely engrossed in what he was making. The first night, he was searching a recipe book. The second, he was mixing up his dough, adding eggs, milk, spices. The third night he was kneading the dough. The fourth night he was forming the dough into a Gingerbread Man, or rather a Gingerbread Woman. The fifth night he placed the Gingerbread Woman in the oven. The sixth night, for the first time in a long time, she didn't dream about the village.

On the sixth night, the night before her birthday, the anniversary of Frank's death, she found herself at a campfire. She realized she was dreaming a memory, a good one. She and her friends sat around the fire, most of them were drinking beer, she was drinking hot chocolate. She moved closer to Frank and he put his arm around her. She leaned against his shoulder. His clothes smelled clean. Her forehead pressed against the stubble on his chin. He turned and kissed her.

She woke the next day, on her birthday, feeling better than she had in long time. She didn't dare think that it would last. She went to work, and for one whole day she didn't see any of the villagers. She refused to believe they had left her alone. When the day was over, she



returned home and pensively prepared for bed. She held off sleep for as long as she could, not wanting the reprieve to end.

When she fell asleep, she was back in the village. It was deserted. She walked from shop to shop and found them all empty. She wandered aimlessly, confused, not daring to hope. She heard a knocking sound and woke up, finding herself in Frank's old house. There were people downstairs. Against her will, she stood and made her way down the steps. Walking into the kitchen she saw them, all of them, sitting around the table. They had forced their way into the real world. She was not surprised, she had expected it to happen one day. Strangely enough, she wasn't frightened, though she knew something horrible was bound to happen. She was tired. It didn't matter what they did to her anymore.

The room was lit by a circle of candles in the center of the table, and in the middle of the circle was a small silver pedestal, upon which sat the covered silver tray. The baker stood and slowly pulled the lid from the tray. She was expecting the wolf's head, but instead found a Gingerbread Woman, one that oddly looked exactly like her. The Baker picked it up and she found herself rising into the air. He handed it to the Cobbler, who nibbled on its right foot. No sooner had his teeth sunk into the cookie than she felt excruciating pain in her own foot. Crying out she looked down at her foot and saw it disappearing before her eyes. The Cobbler handed it to the Candle-Stick Maker, who greedily bit into its left leg, tearing half off it off. She felt a sensation of her left leg being ripped off just below the knee. Looking down she once again found a piece of her body missing. The Tailor gnawed on her left hand before finally breaking it off, she could feel it being chewed right up to the point that he swallowed it. The Butcher broke her right arm off at the elbow and popped it into his mouth. The Mortician took the rest of her left arm up to her shoulder. The Grocer took what remained of her right leg. She didn't know how long she had been screaming. She hung suspended in air, pulled a part, most of her body simply gone. The Baker gingerly took what remained from the Grocer. He looked up at Noelle, and slowly placed her head in his mouth.